11 Cavafy's Quarrel with Tennyson

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In the preceding chapter, Georgia Gotsi outlines the broader reception of Tennyson in the Greek-speaking world up to 1930; here I complement her data and assessment with a discussion of the modern Greek poet likely to be of most interest to Tennysonians. I don't of course mean by the title of this chapter that the two poets in question ever met, let alone quarrelled, though their dates would have made that possible: Tennyson died in 1892, when C. P. Cavafy, who had left England in 1877, was almost 30 (Mackridge 2007, XLV). Although we know nothing about Cavafy's schooling, his adolescence spent in Liverpool and London (1872–77), his English-language juvenilia and his lifelong use of English for some forms of writing (Liddell 2000) all attest to Cavafy's intimacy with English literary culture. Were we to stage an imaginary conversation between Cavafy and Tennyson, it might perhaps be in the London salon of the Greek art collectors and patrons of the Pre-Raphaelites, the Ionides family (Solomonidis 2014, with Kauffmann 2004). In reality, however, we have, rather, a poetic quarrel (*diaphora*) on Cavafy's part with two major poems of Tennyson in particular, 'Ulysses' and 'St Simeon Stylites', poems that left him feeling at once admiring and – to our profit – dissatisfied. Such an antagonism is tailor-made for Harold Bloom's model of the anxiety of influence and has indeed been viewed in just that spirit (Ιμισdanis 1982).

Yet Cavafy's tense engagement with the poetry of Tennyson is a surprisingly neglected aspect of the Greek poet's apprenticeship and maturity, which leaves scarcely a trace in Daskalopoulos's (2003) monumental bibliography up to 2000 and has been but briefly addressed since (Ricks 2010). Anglophone, but – given his Greek national feeling and anti-colonial affinities – not exactly Anglophile, the Greek poet pits himself against his Victorian predecessor, as G. P. Savidis was the first to show (Savvidēs 1987), with results that are – albeit in uncollected poems – of high poetic interest and merit. Yet what begins as antagonism, I shall argue, eventually yields to a more cryptic use by Cavafy of a side of Tennyson – the preoccupation with manly love and loss – which greatly attracted him in *In Memoriam A.H.H.* and at length came to influence three of his collected poems. In all this, Cavafy displays a knowledge of Tennyson's work (see Kavaphēs 2003, where Lady Barnard's 'Auld Robin

Gray' is seen as a source of *Enoch Arden*) and an ability to read it in a strongly revisionist fashion, that stands in stark contrast with the majority of the poems – for the most part album-verses – surveyed by Gotsi.

With the single exception of Robert Browning, who has been discussed more often, though far from exhaustively, in this connection (see recently Ricks 2003), no English poet overshadowed Cavafy as Tennyson did; and we can document this relationship with unusual clarity, because we possess not just the relevant poems by Cavafy, but some brief critical comments which he wrote but never published (Kavaphēs 2003.1; Cavafy 2009, 531–33).[1] Yet, as we have noted, neither of the two poems of Cavafy most documentably and tensely indebted to Tennyson came to be included in his 154 collected poems – though for different reasons in each case.

For the young Cavafy, Tennyson was the poet laureate of the grudgingly accepted colonial power and of the land of his, however scratchy, education; but Tennyson was also a poet who had devoted his copious energies to two strands that would come to preoccupy Cavafy. The first was recourse to the *Odyssey* myth, which would stimulate Cavafy to 'Ithaca', the best known of all his poems (Cavafy 2007, 36–39).[2] The second was the English poet's attempt in 'St Simeon Stylites' (Tennyson 1987, 1.594–604) to capture the spirit of, certainly, medieval and perhaps all Christianity, against which poem Cavafy, later in his career, wrote a quiet but firm riposte in a poem called, simply, 'Simeon'.

Before I move on in a little detail to the Cavafy poems in question, which I shall quote in full in translations of my own, I should provide just a little introductory context, supplementing Gotsi's pioneering account in this volume. Tennyson was by no means unaware of the living Greeks – far from it. In *Poems by Two Brothers*, he had published 'Exhortation to the Greeks' (Tennyson 1987, 1.159–60), and his intimate friends included Edward Lear, to whose impressions of Greece he in turn paid tribute (Tennyson 1987, 2.46–47). But no biographical legend of Tennyson was ever to take hold in Greece. Why?

It seems to me that Tennyson's status as an eminent Victorian has been particularly disabling to his Greek reputation; perhaps the younger 'bandit' Tennyson that struck Henry Crabb Robinson (1967, 205) would have been more up the Greeks' street. Though he was the most widely read and in some ways the most open critical mind of his time, the dominant poet of Cavafy's era, Kōstēs Palamas, was limited by what of Tennyson he could find in French (notably *Enoch Arden*) and also oddly hidebound by the view that Tennyson represented one particular form of the modern. For Palamas in 1901 (n.d., 2.384), Tennyson was, above all, the poet of 'Darwinian truth'. Such a reading depends on an anachronistic and decontextualized view of sections of *In Memoriam*, as also perhaps on a second-hand report of Tennyson's 'Lucretius' (for Greek parallels to which see Ricks [2014]). The other, rather odd, respect in which Palamas (n.d., 343) foregrounds Tennyson is as, in 'Ulysses', a poet

[1] These items first appeared in Savvidēs (1987) and Peridēs (1948, 170–71) respectively.

[2] The Greek texts of Cavafy's collected poems are cited from Cavafy (2007), but the translations that appear here are my own.

of British thalassocracy. Though this reflects something of Palamas's sense of himself as poet of the nation – and increasingly of Greece's irredentist claims – it reveals a lack of attention to what is really going on in 'Ulysses'.

Cavafy, Palamas's canniest rival among Greek poets, went much deeper, but took a while to get there. His early rejected poem, 'Second Odyssey' (written 1894 – just two years after the English poet's death – but published as recently as 1985), both expresses a debt to Tennyson in its epigraph and is evidently under his thrall:

Second Odyssey
Dante, *Inferno*, Canto XXVI: Tennyson, 'Ulysses'

A second Odyssey, a great one,
and greater than the first, perhaps. And yet, alas,
sans Homer, sans hexameters.

Small it was, his ancestral home,
small, his ancestral town,
and that whole Ithaca of his was small.

Telemachus' devotion, the fidelity
of Penelope, his father's venerable age,
his old friends, a devoted
populace's love,
the happy rest of home
entered as rays of joy
the seafarer's heart.

And then, as rays do, set.

A thirst

awoke within him for the sea.
He came to hate the air on land.
His sleep at night was troubled
by visions of Hesperia.
Nostalgia seized him
for journeys, and for morning
landings at harbours which,
with what joy, you reach for the first time.
Telemachus' devotion, the fidelity
of Penelope, his father's venerable age,
his old friends, a devoted
populace's love,
and peace and rest
at home – he tired of them.

And left.

When Ithaca's shores
grew faint before his eyes

and he set his course with full sail for the sunset,
for the Iberians, for the Pillars of Hercules –
far from any Achaean sea –
he felt he lived once more, that he
had cast aside the weary bonds
of known domestic things.
And his venturesome heart
found itself coldly gladdened, void of love.[3]

Cavafy's poetic encounters with the *Iliad* were close (perhaps, with a glance at Tennyson's 'Tithonus' (Ricks 1989, 96–97). In puzzling out just how to produce a modern Odysseus – the subject of an illuminating recent book by Edith Hall (2008) – Cavafy could not ignore the two most powerful post-Homeric guises of the hero to that date: those presented by Dante and Tennyson. Cavafy's explorations ran in parallel tracks: in a belletristic essay which he did not publish bringing Dante and Tennyson together to the Greek reader's attention; and, more searchingly, as he sought to insert his own poetic re-reading of the myth in between their versions and that of Homer – again, in a text he never published. Even that text has attracted relatively little critical attention, let alone in terms of mining its Tennysonian dimension, since its first classic discussion by the greatest of Cavafy scholars, G. P. Savidis in 1974 (now Savvidēs 1987). In fact, Tennyson has been little more than hinted at in subsequent treatments of this complex poem (Pieris 1996; Marōnitēs 2001; Oikonomou 2004, 71–73; Papakyriakou 2007, 30–33, 84–92).

It is important to stress that, though Cavafy has nothing new to say about Dante's telling of Ulysses's last voyage in *Inferno* XXVI, the mention of the patriarch Dante is not merely camouflage for an attack on Tennyson (as Savvidēs [1987, 188] perhaps comes too close to arguing). At the same time, Cavafy cannot be numbered among those many Modernists for whom Dante assumed a central place (McDougal 1984; Havely 2014). At any rate, Cavafy praises Dante's account in conventional terms, and doesn't seem to get down to business until he comments on Tennyson as follows:

> To the English poet lesser praise is due, since he had to hand the idea, the raw material. But he has worked it up like an experienced craftsman […] In Tennyson's version, we find too a sense of the *incompris*, the disgust provoked in him by life on his obscure island and the exigency of life among lesser folk [sc. Odysseus]. (Kavaphēs 2003.1, 225)[4]

3 The Greek text, from www.cavafy.com, may not be given here for reasons of copyright.

4 'Eis ton Anglon poiētēn oligoteros epainos harmozei, dioti ēuren ētoimen tēn idean, tēn protēn hylēn. All' exergasthē autēn hōs kallitechnēs empeiros […] Para to Tennyson synteinei episēs to aisthēma tou "incompris", he aēidia hēn to proxenei ho vios en tē aphanei tou nēsō kai hē anankē tou zein me anthrōpous katōterous.' My translation, from Kavaphēs 2003.1. For a translation of the whole essay, see Cavafy (2010, 103–11).

The form and idiom of Cavafy's poem, in iambic hendecasyllables, might unkindly be called Parnassian, in the sense that Hopkins (2013, 67–71) used it of middle-of-the road Tennyson; it might even be called sub-Tennysonian. But there is more to it, as we shall see: within the, as it might first appear, slightly hollow classicism of the poem there is a real effort to get to grips with the material and a kind of ambition perhaps lacking in 'Ithaca', the rewrite of this poem that usurped it. That effort, however, in an exact parallel with Cavafy's celebrated (but also unpublished) subversion of *Hamlet*, 'King Claudius' (conveniently in Gross 2002, 205–07), is hampered by a grievous, though easily remediable, strategic failure in the poem's framing. Like 'King Claudius', this is a poem which begins with a gauche and otiose opening section, bathetic in itself and blurring the poem's true engagement with the theme – a theme treated with some shrewdness. There was no need to lament the fact that Homer does not narrate Odysseus's last journey and that, as a consequence, no authentically Greek version of the story thus exists; for the anticipation of that journey, following Tiresias's prophecy in Book XI, is of course richly present in the *Odyssey* itself. Nor in fact does Cavafy here react against Western versions of Ulysses by re-Hellenizing him to any significant extent – let alone by producing, say, a modern Greek poem in dactylic hexameters that might rebut the negative aspects of Ulysses seen through Western eyes.

By the same token, the citation of Dante and Tennyson in the epigraph is quite at odds with Cavafy's mature technique: in his collected poems not one of the moderns he engages with is ever mentioned by name (nor, refreshingly, does any poem by him bear a dedication). The *aide-mémoire* might have been needed by the middlebrow audience for Cavafy's never-published article on the theme, but not by that 'fit audience though few' to which his poetry aspired – the audience, say, for 'Simeon', had it been published. It is easy for a critic seeking to salvage the poem to remove the bibliographical reference. Equally easy is the removal of the three-line opening section; and once it is removed, the poem becomes a quite different thing, with a bitterly abrupt beginning: 'Small it was, his ancestral home.'[5] We are taken directly into the mind of Odysseus, and the whole of the rest of the poem can be read as free indirect speech, not a narration of his feelings from an outside perspective.

This shift to the third person contains the germ of what is an uneven, but in some ways powerful, performance with some sharply intelligent ingredients. Dante's Ulysses addresses the visitor to Hell with an undiminished rhetorical mastery that leaves the hearer struck with awe, not least through the embedded set-piece speech to the companions. Tennyson's Ulysses too is still the possessor of all his rhetorical powers, even if the audience of mariners is doubtless imaginary and his prospects of really departing as unlikely as Lear's dreams of regaining his kingdom. Against both models, Cavafy distinguishes his Odysseus for a jaded coolness of temper. It is simple ennui, not heroism, emulousness or longing for the past, that drives him: he voices no recollections of the comradeship of the Trojan War – or of any companionship – and he seeks not to transgress the will of his Maker, nor to plunge his weary soul

5 'Ēto mikron to patrikon tou dōma.'

into oblivion, but simply to slip the wearisome bonds of the domestic by a last voyage beyond the Pillars of Hercules. The geographical reference is one of the three elements that tie the poem to Dante as well as to Tennyson (following the perspective of Cavafy's critical sketch), and for Cavafy it derives its significance only when related to the earlier lines: 'His sleep at night was troubled / by visions of Hesperia.'[6] The words evoke a sense painfully present in Cavafy's own emulous mind: how can a modern Greek poem lay claim to the Homeric heritage in the face of the power of the West, of Dante the classic and of Tennyson the so recently dead?

The other Dantean substratum in 'Second Odyssey' is the section about the reunion with son, father and wife, which, with a little reordering, closely tracks *Inferno* 26.94–96: 'not fondness for a son nor duty to an aged father, nor the love I owed Penelope which should have gladdened her' (Sinclair 1961, 325), but with one important shift: Cavafy's folding of Penelope between son and father reduces her significance in much the way that her sole appearance in Tennyson's 'Ulysses' is the glum 'matched with an aged wife'. However, Cavafy also draws out the significance of Dante's Ulysses' easily unnoticed suggestion of Penelope's discontent, so as to transfer to his Odysseus that same rapid setting of the sun of optimism. Furthermore, the presence in Dante and Cavafy alike of Laertes, evidently dead in the Tennyson version, contributes to the sense that 'Second Odyssey' is in fact a poem about middle age, not old age, and makes its element of impatience the more visible. What is, however, particularly subtle about Cavafy's taking up of Dante's lines is the fact that he then repeats them at a later point, generating at once a deep sense of fatalism and a subtle parody of Homeric formulae – surely indebted to Tennyson's richly Homerizing idiom throughout his poem – so as to suggest the limitations of such formulas as something to live by. It is as if the hexameters mentioned in the opening section have gone, yet their language haunts the poem. (Here there is perhaps a gesture towards Matthew Arnold, another Victorian influence on Cavafy [Ricks 1988].)

I have argued that 'Second Odyssey' would be a considerable poem were the epigraph and opening lines removed: it would cunningly embrace certain elements in Dante and Tennyson, but astutely reject others to produce a quintessentially modern Ulysses whose core motivation is world-weariness, inserting *taedium vitae* where we might expect the famous old curriculum vitae. Why, then, or rather, how did Cavafy come to reject the poem? The prime reason must surely be his unwillingness to put forward a poem whose precursors are, so to speak, visible on the surface and a poem whose idiom, competent as it is, is a relatively impersonal one (as well as containing one marked Anglicism).[7] But I think a more fundamental reason may be the incompatibility within a single poem of certain strands in it that Cavafy later chose to farm out to separate poems. Most pressingly, how far is the warm nostalgia for ports once reached for the first time compatible with the loveless warming of the heart at the end, that seems to bring us close to the vulgarized

[6] 'To hypnon tou etaratton tehn nykta / tēs Hesperias ta phantasmata.'

[7] So I read *elipothymoun* (l. 30), echoing 'fades' in 'Ulysses' (l. 20).

Nietzschean outlook which we know the Greek poet to have disliked (Cavafy 2010, 138–39).

As so often with Cavafy, however, a poem rejected is not necessarily evacuated. We can see that the more famous poem 'The City' (1910) (Cavafy 2007, 28–29; with Pieris 1996, 100, who adduces personal notes) addresses the same human feelings in an idiom which derives its force precisely from its abstraction from all named geographical realities or mythical protagonists. The work of confining the restless protagonist (there addressed in the second person) is performed by the merciless rhyme scheme alone, along with the repetitions that now have nothing of a Homeric provenance. A Cavafy initially gripped by the closest he can get to Tennysonian rhetoric comes to find his way round it – not in conflict with it – and by eschewing those very features which were already leading the literal-minded to enlist 'Ulysses' in the service of school speech days. *Any* city in 'The City' can be as stultifying as the 'little isle'; *any* sea can be as confining as the 'Achaean sea' is when compared to the wide ocean; *every* man can be, perhaps is, his own restless Odysseus, whose heart is not warmed by lovelessness but 'like a corpse – buried'. In the claim that 'there is no ship for you, no road', our suspicion as readers that this was true for Tennyson's solitary Ulysses is borne out in a modern idiom that stands in no need of a mythological apparatus.

That is just one part of what use Cavafy made of that surprisingly fertile poem, 'Second Odyssey'. Published only in 1985, Cavafy's poem appeared too late to affect classic critical treatments of the 'Ulysses' theme (Stanford 1968). But it now provides a powerful tool for reading its famous successor, 'Ithaca' as, among other things, a cannily post-Tennysonian poem.

Despite its generally Tennysonian idiom, 'Second Odyssey' does not quarry 'Ulysses' for phrases as, say, 'King Claudius' does *Hamlet*. But there is just one phrase (unless we take the 'acquired knowledge' as a general hint) from 'Ulysses' which reappears in free translation and which I underline in quoting. The lines, 'My mariners, / Souls that have toiled, and wrought, and thought with me – / That ever *with a frolic welcome* took / The thunder and the sunshine', are transmuted into 'at harbours / which *with what joy* you reach for the first time'.[8] The change of context is crucial: Tennyson's Ulysses imagines in his (imaginary) companions that glad devotion to service for which they are not much noted in the *Odyssey* and thus generates a powerfully ironic element in his poem. 'Second Odyssey', slipping at this point into the second person, seems to establish the arrival at new harbours as something which rightly provokes joy in any human spirit, even one as jaded as that of Odysseus back home in Ithaca. The little phrase, *me ti charan* (with what joy) was to find its way verbatim into 'Ithaca', justifying the claim that the later poem is indeed a version of the earlier. It is of course a demythologizing version, in which a specifically Epicurean outlook pervades the poem and in which even the 'Egyptian cities' don't strongly evoke Menelaus's voyage narrated in *Odyssey* IV. Yet 'Ithaca's demythologizing vein, with its particular sensuous frisson, may better be understood if it is read as a poem which escapes Tennyson obliquely,

[8] Lines 21–22: 'eis tous limenas hopou, / me ti charan, protēn phoran emvaineis.'

through Tennyson (as, of course, in a host of other ways). 'Second Odyssey', may, as I have argued, have been holed below the waterline; but in saving just one verbal plank of it Cavafy was able to launch a seaworthy vessel in the form of the replacement poem 'Ithaca'.

Cavafy recorded his respect for *Measure for Measure* for being able so powerfully to articulate competing world-views in a single character in a single scene (Kavaphēs 2003.2, 47–52). He can't have failed to identify and admire the same gift when different Tennyson poems are set side by side to do much the same thing. 'The Lotos-Eaters' (first version 1832) may be read as a pendant to 'Ulysses'; and it shares with Cavafy's 'Ithaca' a long gestation before it reached its final form of 1842. It is indeed of no little interest that it is lines 114–32, inserted in the 1842 version (Tennyson 1987, 1.473), that most engage Cavafy: '"Courage", he said, and pointed toward the land.' An unnamed Ulysses launches the poem; but this is succeeded by the voice of those who prefer to eat the lotus and reject his high claims. What is particularly subtle is that the Lotos-Eaters have exactly the same lack of interest in home, hearth and marriage bed, which afflicts Ulysses and the 'little isle'. This strand in Tennyson's revisionist reading of the *Odyssey* feeds into Cavafy's 'Ithaca' (completed in 1911):

When you set out for Ithaca,
pray that the way be a long one,
full of adventure, full of acquired knowledge.
The Laestrygonians and the Cyclopes,
angry Poseidon, have no fear of them,
such things on your way will not be yours to encounter,
if your thought remains elevated, if a select
emotion touches your spirit and body.
The Laestrygonians and the Cyclopes,
fierce Poseidon, will not be yours to encounter,
if you are not dragging them along in your soul,
if it is not your soul setting them before you.

Pray that the way be a long one.
May there be many a summer morning
on which with what gratification, with what joy
you enter harbours for the first time seen;
to halt at Phoenician trading stations
and purchase the fine merchandise,
mother of pearl and coral, amber and ebony,
and voluptuous perfumes of every kind,
as great an abundance as you can of voluptuous perfumes;
to go to many an Egyptian city,
to learn and to learn from lettered men.

Always in mind keep Ithaca.
Arrival there is your destination.
But do not hurry the journey at all.
Better it last for many a year;
and for you to cast anchor on the isle now an old man,

rich with all you gained along the way,
not expecting riches to be the gift of Ithaca.

Ithaca gave you the lovely journey.
But for her you would not have gone your way.
But she has nothing to give you now.

And if you find her poor, Ithaca has not gulled you.
Wise as you now are, with so much experience,
by this time you will have understood what Ithacas mean. (Cavafy 2007, 36–38)

This is a poem that cunningly stations itself between 'Ulysses' and 'The Lotos-Eaters', neither exhorting the addressee to seek a newer world, nor lulling him to rest and wander no more. Ithaca will not be a place long sought, only to be rejected; nor will it be dismissed as merely petty. No oath will be sworn, whether to travel on or to stay put: instead a quiet prayer to travel slowly is the core of the poem. Rather than sinking himself in a lushly described natural setting, like Tennyson's Lotos-Eaters, the voyager in Cavafy is called to immerse himself in culture, with the produce of land and sea taking on a meaning which governs the sensual body and the wise spirit. There is a world of difference (even if this be, which I don't believe it to be, a lexical coincidence) between the Lotos-Eaters' wish to dream 'like yonder amber light, / Which will not leave the myrrh-bush on the height' (ll. 102–03: Tennyson 1987, 1.473) and the 'amber' and the repeated 'voluptuous perfumes' (*myrōdika*) which form the climax of 'Ithaca'. Such thefts by Cavafy are as satisfying as his raids on Browning.

The differences between the two poems crystallize in Tennyson's last section (ll. 153–73: 1987, 1.474–76), where the Lotos-Eaters give voice to an open doctrine of Epicureanism: 'Let us swear an oath, and keep it with an equal mind, / In the hollow Lotos-land to live and lie reclined / On the hills like Gods together, careless of mankind.' Now 'Ithaca' too is explicitly Epicurean, in that the relevance to us of mythical figures, and especially Poseidon, is rejected by the voice of the poem; and it will readily be agreed that such an outlook better fits the Cavafian oeuvre and outlook than that of 'Second Odyssey'. Even the affinity between the 'hollow Lotos-land' and 'poor' Ithaca is striking: accompanied by, or following, experience of the senses, this lack of substance to the final destination can now be ignored. But, side by side with this Epicureanism, which the two poems hold in common, there is a certain energy to the Cavafian journey, centred on the bright morning, by contrast with the 'perpetual afternoon' of Lotos-land. Where the Lotos-Eaters (ll. 165–67) disdain the race of 'men that cleave the soil, / Sow the seed, and reap the harvest with enduring toil, /Storing yearly little dues of wheat, and wine and oil' (Tennyson 1987, 1.476), Cavafy's poem, appropriately enough from a poet of proud mercantile ancestry (emphasized by Hall 2008, 161–63), prizes the providence and sound commercial judgement of the traveller. Life, for this poem, is full of meaning, as indeed is poetry itself. The Lotos-Eaters sum up their past history, the sack of Troy, as (l. 164: Tennyson 1987, 1.476) 'Like a tale of little meaning though the words are strong'. It is as if there is a contest

of genres here, with the lyric of the Lotos-Eaters' choric song triumphing over Homeric epic. Yet that same word 'meaning' (*sēmainoun*) is nothing less than the last word Cavafy leaves us with. No 'tale of little meaning' for him – in this poem, at least.

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Cavafy's engagement with Tennyson in 'Second Odyssey', as we have seen, was readjusted by a quite different sort of engagement in 'Ithaca'; and the compositional journey was indeed a long one, from 1894 to 1911. But this was not to be his last trying of conclusions with the Englishman, and we may observe that where poetic animus is at issue, revenge may be a dish best eaten cold. Here is Cavafy's unpublished poem of 1917, 'Simeon':

I've seen his latest poems, yes;
all Berytus is wild about them.
I'll take a proper look at them some other day.
I can't today: I'm a little out of sorts.

He is indeed a better Grecian than Libanius.
But one step up from Meleager? I think not.

Oh Mebes, what of Libanius! and what of books!
and what of petty matters! … Mebes, yesterday I found myself
– as luck would have it – at the foot of Simeon's pillar.

I squeezed in with the Christians
at their silent prayer and worship
and devotions; save that, being no Christian,
I lacked their spiritual tranquillity –
and I started trembling all over and feeling dreadful;
and I started to shudder and shake and find it all too much.
I can see you smiling! Think of it, though: thirty-five years,
winter, summer, night, day, thirty-five
years atop a pillar, bearing living witness.
Before we were even born – I'm twenty-nine,
and you, I take it, younger –
before we were even born, imagine it,
Simeon made the ascent to the top of his pillar
and ever since has stayed there face to face with God.

I don't feel up to work today.
But Mebes, I won't object to its being said
that, whatever the other sophists say,
yes, I acknowledge Lamon
is Syria's leading poet.[9]

[9] The Greek text is copyrighted.

This poem from 1917 features a different kind of great protagonist. Indeed, there would be no striking reason to assume a relationship with Tennyson's poem at all, given Cavafy's interest in the historical transition from paganism to Christianity, did we not possess some marginal comments in his copiously annotated copy of Gibbon. These date back to 1899 and show how, from back then, a fuse had been lit: Cavafy was intent to redress the balance, poetically and historically. He writes (as he often does for personal purposes, in English):

> I have met with only one poem on Simeon Stylites, but it is in no way worthy of the subject. The poem of Tennyson, though it contains some well-made verses, fails in tone. Its great defect lies in its form of a monologue. The complaints of Simeon, his eagerness for the meed of saints, the white robe and the palm, his dubious humility, his latent vanity, are not objectionable in themselves and may be [sic] were necessary to the poem, but they have been handled in a common, almost a vulgar manner. It was a very difficult task – a task reserved, perhaps, for some mighty king of art – to find fitting language for so great a saint, so wonderful a man. (Cavafy 2009, 531–33)[10]

These are terse but sweeping criticisms with wide implications going beyond the Modernist jibe of Joyce's 'Lawn Tennyson' (Power 1974, 102). 'Well-made verses' is not, for Cavafy, grudging admiration; yet 'St Simeon Stylites' is such as to arouse in the younger poet some of those criticisms voiced by those Victorians who didn't so much see *through* Tennyson as *beyond* him. Think of Bagehot's (1965, 343) scruples about 'ornate art' with its 'want of simplicity. Nothing is described as it is, everything has about it an atmosphere of *something else*'; or of Acton (in Hill 2000, 345) on 'the indefiniteness of his knowledge'.

Now the whole point of Tennyson's admirable poem is in the saint's febrile imagination, his florid imaginings of a place in paradise; so the charge of unrealism might seem to lack purchase here. Even the opening of Tennyson's poem gives an idea of the distance Cavafy has assumed from it:

Although I be the basest of mankind,
From scalp to sole one slough and crust of sin,
Unfit for earth, unfit for heaven, scarce meet
For troops of devils, mad with blasphemy,
I will not cease to grasp the hope I hold
Of saintdom …
(Tennyson 1987, 1.594–95).

It is true that Cavafy's self-consciously Alexandrian aesthetic almost certainly deemed the poem's length a mark of inferior craftsmanship. But it can't be said that Tennyson doesn't make the most of the amplitude of his poem: winding through its subtle paragraphing are the whole range of moods which have marked Simeon's all-too-human progress through the seasons, from self-aggrandizement to (perhaps) apostolic plainness. Cavafy's objections lie elsewhere.

[10] This marginal note, first published in 1948 (Perides 1948, 70–71), may be read in the context of Cavafy's reactions to Gibbon (Haas 1982).

Tennyson gleaned his knowledge of the saint from Gibbon's caustic account, but above all from William Hone's *Every-Day Book*, a work of a strong Protestant stripe: he did not profess a historically informed knowledge of Simeon and later conceded, apparently with some embarrassment, that he had out of sheer ignorance given the poem a Northern colouring, rather than a Near Eastern one (Tennyson 1987, 1.593–94). In fact, however, there is no obvious Western colouring or clear anachronism – things Cavafy would have been sure to seize on mercilessly. Yet it is true that Tennyson's Simeon is a generic saint of a generic age of superstition, as timeless as a painting of the Temptation of St Antony and as potentially rich in the comic. For a culture devoted to the saints like Greek Orthodoxy, such an enterprise, even if not seen as actually impious, can in the end be no more than superficial. Tennyson's poem is, of course, more than mere knocking copy; but for Cavafy it comes too close to knockabout.

For it is not unreasonable to read Tennyson's poem (which he himself used to recite with a sense of the grotesque) (Tennyson 1987, 1.593–94) as the versification of a Gibbonian outlook, in which the endurance of the saint arouses repugnance. In the year of its writing, 1833, the first steps of the Oxford Movement were to set in motion a religious subculture which took the saints seriously once more; but Tennyson's entire poem is permeated with the old Protestant outlook, however brilliantly expressed. Cavafy's own view, as expressed in his comments, does not implicitly criticize Tennyson as impious or infidel (the less flattering sides he attributes to Simeon are 'not objectionable in themselves'), but rather as wanting in imagination:

> This great, this wonderful saint is surely an object to be singled out in ecclesiastical history for admiration and study. He has been, perhaps, the only man who has dared to be really *alone* [...] The glory of Simeon filled and astounded the earth. Innumerable pilgrims crowded round his column. People came from the farthest West and from the farthest East, from Britain and from India, to gaze on the unique sight – on this candle of faith (such is the magnificent language of the historian Theodoret) set up and lit on a lofty chandelier. (Cavafy 2009, 531–33)

For Cavafy, then, Simeon is a pillar of 'our illustrious Byzantine past' (Cavafy 2007, 64–65) and the Greek poet's national feeling was, we too readily forget, strong. Yet for Cavafy, Simeon was also, like the Odysseus of 'Second Odyssey', a figure of existential daring. Neither type of tribute entails assent to Christian belief; yet a degree of imaginative assent is demanded of the poet who wishes to do the Simeon theme justice. Cavafy provides that imaginative assent through a dramatic monologue voiced this time by one of those many visitors to Simeon's pillar; and the Greek poet's monologue is a mirror image of the monologue that is its model.

In his orotundity, stridency and sheer rambling length, Tennyson's Simeon is a speaker who scarcely brooks interlocutors other than his God (first addressed, in a ritual formula, in the seventh line and frequently thereafter); and for large tracts of the poem we might almost overlook the fact that the poem contains interlocutors – until the last part, at which the (apparently) dying saint calls on the faithful for aid and promises them his own. Reading

back from that, we notice that the poem's long flow is in fact punctuated by a number of such references, showing that Simeon, though far above other men spatially, keeps a keen eye on them and has an eye to the figure he cuts before them (see especially line 133: 'Good people, you do ill to kneel to me ... ' [Tennyson 1987, 1.600]). Most notably, of course, he is keenly aware of those naysayers who turn up among the faithful and call on him to leap, in the time-hallowed manner of those who turn up at a suicide jump: 'Fall down, O Simeon' (l. 97: 1987, 1.599). It is Cavafy's stroke of genius to take us from the top of the pillar to the bottom, and what we fashionably call 'history from below'. He makes his observer of Simeon neither one of the faithful, nor a casual hooligan – for Cavafy, Tennyson is perhaps perilously close to being one of the latter – but a quite different social type who has walked in from a different milieu and indeed a different kind of poem.

At the same time, Cavafy is intent to maintain much the same chronological framework, hence the fact that the only lines of his poem which come close to quoting Tennyson's are those which specify the date at which we find ourselves: 'thrice ten years [...] Rain, wind, frost, heat, hail, damp, and sleet, and snow' (ll. 10–16: 1987, 1.595). St Simeon (390–459) spent a total of thirty-seven years atop successively higher pillars (Farmer 2003). Tennyson may or may not place him at the very end of his life; Cavafy, we may be sure, situates him towards the end, but not quite at it.

'St Simeon Stylites' in its comic (but not only comic) treatment of history gets perhaps as close as Tennyson ever did to the Browning manner, and for that reason it is hardly surprising that it attracted Cavafy's interest. But where his relation to Browning is less antagonistic, the Greek poet evidently means to meet Tennyson's poem on its own ground and to contest its historicity. No better way could be found than, first of all, to label the poem plain 'Simeon': the saint before his canonization, before history has made up its mind; while keen minds are yet unresolved as to the great choice between paganism and Christianity (see Ricks 2001). Cavafy's poem disarms us by its oblique entry into the topic. We find ourselves in a discussion between two young men of Antioch in 454 or so. (The name of the interlocutor, Mebes, reappears as that of an expensive 'renter' in Antioch in the canonical poem of 1926, 'Sophist on his Departure from Syria' [Cavafy 2007, 164].) It is a literary discussion at the outset, with the speaker, an arbiter of taste, evidently used to being asked to give literary pronouncements. His main criterion of worth is the correctness of a man's Greek, and his recent benchmark evidently the late pagan sophist Libanius; though it is to the Hellenistic poet Meleager that he attributes the *ne plus ultra* of Hellenic polish.

But at that point the effete young man turns from literary gossip, as there is something he wants to get off his chest. He claims to have found himself at Simeon's pillar, as if ashamed to admit he sought it out, even as a curiosity. Now Simeon's station was a considerable way outside the city, a place for pilgrims but hardly for the weary *flâneur*; something he isn't (yet) letting on has drawn our speaker there. And once there the atmosphere of intense piety, seen from in its midst and not from the great cultural distance that separates Tennyson from Mediterranean popular religion, starts to have an intense physical effect. Here Cavafy subtly adapts and subsumes the symptoms of

Simeon's state into a different context. Simeon speaks of his affliction by 'coughs, aches, ulcerous throes and cramps' (l. 13: Tennyson 1987, 1.595) with the relish with which an Englishman boasts about his flu symptoms; Cavafy's observer seems possessed by fear and trembling that has no mere physical cause. What is its cause? A 'serious doubting apprehension', in Joseph Butler's phrase (1906, 189), that for a man to have spent half his life so intently communicating with something – something which, perhaps unwittingly, our speaker slips into calling God – dwarfs the petty affairs of one whose literary and erotic body-clock is ticking away. It takes some guts to admit this, as the interlocutor's worldly reaction shows.

Cavafy's 'Simeon', then, is a conversion poem, but we do not witness the conversion, only a crisis that may, beyond the poem, precipitate it. Does the speaker convert, late but not too late, like the protagonist of Cavafy's 'Tomb of Ignatius' (Cavafy 2007, 92)? It is too early to say; for to cover his blushes, compose himself and get back to business, our speaker reverts at the end to the mode of *ex cathedra* literary judgement – in such a way, though, as to suggest that Lamon is the top contemporary poet in all-too-weary tones (*'Hugo, hélas!'* '*Hugo, alas!*'). Tennyson has brilliantly staged the process of saint-making, but Cavafy's sense of interiority – and indeed the apophatic – makes a canny answer to a powerful precursor.

'Simeon' is a poem of great merit; but Cavafy, by this stage in his career, evidently shunned direct encounters with Tennyson and avoided the sort of direct tangling with his shade that was astutely pointed to by Savidis (1987). He must also have felt a sense of reserve: that he himself was not, even after eighteen years of preparation, the 'mighty king of art' to tackle the subject, despite his pride in possessing what he once described in a third-person puff for himself as 'la sobriété de son style impeccable' (Kavaphēs 2003.3, 313). We must not forget, either, that one of his intimates noted Cavafy's zeal for the Orthodox Church (Valassopoulo 2009), even if this may have been a matter of cultural allegiance more than of belief. Cavafy's 'Simeon' was left to be plundered for a later poem – rather as we saw a tiny kernel of 'Second Odyssey' being recycled in 'Ithaca'; and the short but intense scene where a shaken pagan narrator is hemmed in by the Christian flock found its way twelve years later into the longest and most openly emotional of all Cavafy's poems: 'Myres, Alexandria A.D. 340' (Cavafy 2007, 186–90).

Cavafy's quarrel with Tennyson. We have seen, I trust, how the Greek poet reaches a kind of accommodation with his precursor. In his early prose comments he may say, coolly, 'To the English poet lesser praise is due', or more unguardedly, deplore the presence of a 'common, almost a vulgar manner'; but the resulting poems that take so long to create tell a rather different story. But where, if anywhere, in this literary plot came something like a reconciliation? Where the meeting of minds seems to me to take place is 'behind the veil, behind the veil', in late and quiet echoes by Cavafy of *In Memoriam*, to which, with once more a debt to the greatest of Cavafy scholars, G. P. Savidis (in Karyōtakēs 1999, 315), I now more briefly turn.

*

The Greek poet's initially open responses to Tennyson discussed above come to be replaced in his mature work by thefts much less readily identifiable,[11] and it would be surprising if *In Memoriam* had left no trace on Cavafy, when it is, as Gotsi shows, present in Greek poetry in other ways.

In Memoriam's form, of course (the long sequence of untitled poems), its predominantly English and often rural setting, and its religious-philosophical bent were all un-Cavafian to a high degree. Yet the volume's anonymous publication in 1850 and its dwelling on the successive ill-assorted feelings generated by a loss of seventeen years before bring it close to the sort of retrospect on a parting with a young man through death, which is the stuff of so many of Cavafy's poems. But the reader would rightly be reluctant to see the Greek poet as rewriting *In Memoriam* were there no features of the earlier poem's imagery or phraseology which re-emerge – in quite different settings and for different purposes, it is true – in Cavafy's poetry. Here are just three examples – all, significantly, quarried from the earlier part of Tennyson's poem. (The wider meditations that develop later on in the sequence are rather remote from Cavafy's outlook.) The least speculative case is this one:

Melancholy of Jason Cleander; Poet in Commagene (A.D. 595)

The ageing of my body and my form
is a wound dealt by a cruel knife.
I lack perseverance.
To thee I fly, Art of Poesy,
who knowest somewhat of medicines;
trials in the numbing of pain, through Imagination and Word.

It is a wound dealt by a cruel knife.–
Fetch me thy medicines, Art of Poesy,
which – for a short space – stop the wound being felt.
(Cavafy 2007, 130)

The voice is that of a young man less than fifty years before the eastern buffer-kingdom he inhabits, with its precious eastern Hellenic culture, will fall to the Muslim conqueror. Jason mourns, though, not that event which he cannot suspect and may well not live to see; nor (like Tennyson) the death of another man; but the slow death of his own good looks. Using a word found in Marian prayers, *prostrechō* ('have recourse to'), Jason seeks succour from nowhere but a strongly feminized Art of Poetry. He does not of course literally believe that poetry is the elixir of life – but it can stay the advance of time, just for a little. A similar mixture of emotions, with a wording clearly echoed by Cavafy, is to be found in *In Memoriam*, V (Tennyson 1987, 2.323):

I sometimes hold it half a sin
To put in words the grief I feel;

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[11] In 1974, Robert Liddell (2000, 59) discerned an echo of 'Break, break, break', but without supporting the claim.

For words, like Nature, half reveal
And half conceal the Soul within.

But, for the unquiet heart and brain,
A use in measured language lies;
The sad mechanic exercise,
Like dull narcotics, numbing pain.

In words, like weeds, I'll wrap me o'er,
Like coarsest clothes against the cold:
But that large grief which these enfold
Is given in outline and no more.

Tennyson's starting point is that putting grief into words may be (in part) sinful – less true to the soul within than perhaps silence might be. But in the next stanza the calming effect of metrical utterance is defended, even prescribed: even if the process becomes in part mechanical, in part an exercise (compare Cavafy's 'trials' above); even if it is sad (as with Jason's 'melancholy', which cannot be dispelled by poetry, but over which poetry can, briefly, cast a anaesthetic spell), it can quiet the heart and brain. Cavafy's phrase, '*narkēs tou algous dokimes*' closely tracks 'exercise … / narcotics numbing pain' and transfers it to a historical protagonist. Like a number of other Cavafy poems, 'Melancholy of Jason Cleander' not only avows but enacts the incantatory power of poetry, an act in time, to save the object of love from time's depredations.

The second of my three cases is from the poem that, as we have noted, recycled and supplanted Cavafy's 'Simeon'; and it draws this time on *In Memoriam*, XLI. The penultimate section of 'Myres: Alexandria AD 340' (Cavafy 2007, 186–90), runs as follows:

And of a sudden I was overcome by an eerie
Impression. Vaguely, I felt
Myres was leaving my side;
I felt him now united, a Christian,
With his own, and that I was turning into
A *stranger, a total stranger*; I became aware of
A doubt accosting me: that maybe I had been deluded
By my passion, and had *always* been for him a stranger.–

Compare Tennyson (1987, 2.358–59):

Thy spirit ere our fatal loss
Did ever rise from higher to higher;
As mounts the heavenward altar-fire,
As flies the lighter through the gross.

But thou art turned to something strange,
And I have lost the links that bound
Thy changes; here upon the ground
No more partaker of thy change.

[…]

For though my nature rarely yields
To that vague fear implied in death;

[…]

Yet oft when sundown skirts the moor
An inner trouble I behold,
A spectral doubt which makes me cold,
That I shall be thy mate no more.

Cavafy, of course, has chosen to dramatize the post-Christian predicament through a specific historical setting, the decade of Christianity's adoption by Constantine the Great. His Myres seems to give voice (with, for Cavafy, unusual typographic emphasis) to the same kinds of doubts voiced by Tennyson; yet it is characteristic that the verbal echoes are now embodied in a new whole, and once more through a persona.

A very different, more daring (and less readily detected) adaptation of a poem from *In Memoriam*, now given a contemporary setting and not masked by a persona, had come some years earlier, in 1918:

By the House

Yesterday, taking a turn in an out-of-the-way
neighbourhood, I went by the house
I used to visit in early youth.
There it was my body had been clasped by Love
with his exquisite might.

And yesterday
as I went down the same old street,
at once all was made beautiful by the charm of love,
the shops, the pavements, the stones,
and walls, and balconies, and windows;
no thing of ugliness remained.

And as I stood there, gazing at the door,
and stood there yet, and tarried by the house,
my entire being started to render up
that hoarded sensual thrill.
(Cavafy 2007, 104)

Compare *In Memoriam*, VII (Tennyson 1987, 2.325–26):

Dark house, by which once more I stand
Here in the long unlovely street,
Doors, where my heart was used to beat
So quickly, waiting for a hand,

A hand that can be clasped no more –
Behold me, for I cannot sleep,
And like a guilty thing I creep
At earliest morning to the door.

He is not here; but far away
The noise of life begins again,
And ghastly through the drizzling rain
On the bald street breaks the blank day.

Here Tennyson makes one of those abrupt transitions which add so greatly to the work's force: the dark house (perhaps apostrophized, but not certainly) appears out of nowhere, as if in an isolated neighbourhood (at the end of a 'long [...] street'), and vanishes into nothing at the end. We know it to be 67 Wimpole Street, but the poem does not tell us so (any more than Cavafy ever gives specific addresses in his poems). Although the poem comes early in the sequence, 'once more' suggests some considerable lapse of time since the bereavement; just as long years separate Cavafy's speaker from the intense erotic experience that the house (doubtless a house of ill fame) contained. Of course Tennyson's poem is not directly erotic; but the beating of the heart, the clasp of the hand that cannot be regained (but which is echoed by the clasp of Eros in Cavafy's poem) has a charge, which makes the approach to the door so fraught. It is of course, a variation on the genre of the *paraclausithyron*, but here the object of love is dead, not simply acting heartlessly towards the lover – which makes the address to the door more unavailing than ever.

Tennyson of course gives this a metaphysical colouring: 'He is not here' is not so much the voice of a servant saying 'Young Mr Hallam is not at home', but a bitter echo of Matthew 28.6. In a further possible echo of the early morning setting of John 20.17, the one who creeps to the door of the tomb in the hope of finding Jesus, Mary Magdalene, is told by the risen Christ: *noli me tangere*. Such a reading derives plausibility from the reference to a 'guilty thing' (originally of the Ghost from Hamlet, 1.130) (Tennyson 1987, 2.326). There is something certainly creepy about hanging outside anyone's house before daybreak; and Tennyson's sinister street perhaps generates in Cavafy's mind the red light district that appears in the Greek poem. The noise of life which seems at first in Tennyson's poem to presage a consoling or at least reconciling return to life's preoccupations is in fact the converse: the street is revealed in its full emptiness and ugliness, and the broken music of the last line leaves speaker and reader marooned alike.

If it is the case that Cavafy plays with the motif and the poem, he does so with high ingenuity and a satisfying capacity to invert the scenario. The house was a place of the flesh; the street (down to its paving stones, a detail nowhere else mentioned in Cavafy, who is sketchy about townscapes) is rendered beautiful, not ugly. The memory, too, is preserved within the recollector's *hypostasis*: a unique abstraction in Cavafy's work, and approaching to the depersonalized 'thing'. And it *can* be preserved by memory. If I am right in reading 'Outside the House' as a response to *In Memoriam* VII (which, interestingly, is one of the few poems from that work to have been translated into Greek, as Gotsi shows), it makes a radically new departure. For the mature Cavafy, the fulfilment of Greek love such that its memory can live on provides a kind of stay against the fear of death which dominates his earlier engagement with the great Victorian poet of loss.

'Do you know, a horrible thing has happened to me. I have begun to *doubt* Tennyson', Hopkins wrote in a letter of 1864 (2013, 67). One generation later – and at a wider cultural distance – such doubts proved fertile for Cavafy.

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Introduction

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